

# Eight Days

by windchymes

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Summary: A lot can happen in eight days...

## 1. Chapter 1

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\*\*I've had this idea for ages, but haven't written for a long while, so lets see how this goes :)\*\*

It couldn't be him. It couldn't.

I felt the sharp stab of painful recognition as the name stared at me from the computer screen, bold and black against the white...

\*\*\_Edward Masen\_\*\*

No, it couldn't be him. Not here. Not now.

"How's it going, Bella?" Marc came into the office, coffee mug in hand, and it took me a moment to remember where I was, and what I was supposed to be doing.

"Hm? Whaâ€|oh, um, sorryâ€|yes." Flustered, I quickly scrolled down to the next entry in the client database and tried to focus again, bringing myself back to now, pushing away dark memories of a cold forest and even colder goodbyes. "Um, soâ€|so it seems to be working much faster now, and the screen's not freezing anymore. The files are opening fine. I was just going to do a few checks to make sure."

"You serious?" Marc came to look over my shoulder, watching as I moved through the long list of customers on the Thunder Road Motorcycle Co. database. "I'm useless with this sort of thing." He shook his dark head. "So, what was the problem? What had I

done?"

"It's what you hadn't done. There were some updates that needed installing, that's all."

"Seriously? That's it?" He set the mug down on the desk. "Coffee's for you. White with one, yeah?" Then he watched as I opened the file for Sharon Young. I tried to ignore the soft tremor of my fingers.

"You'd be surprised what a few updates can do. See?" Ms Young's customer information appeared instantly. "No more little egg timer spinning round and round," I said, clicking on different tabs, watching them pop open.

"Yes!" Marc hissed, his eyes focused keenly on the screen. "I hated that bloody egg timer. This is going to make life so much easier. Thanks, Bella."

"No problem. It's what friends are for, right?" Beneath the desk my leg was bouncing up and down frantically.

Marc straightened up and gave me that easy smile that always made me smile back. Except for this time. "I reckon you should abandon marine biology and go into IT," he said. "I owe you dinner for this."

"Um...you don't have to!"

"Yeah, I do. I really appreciate you doing this, especially on a Saturday morning." He leant against the desk and folded his arms across his chest. "You know, the museum has a!"

He was interrupted by the soft ping that meant the showroom doors had just slid open and we both looked in that direction.

"Customers." I gave him a playful shove and a shaky smile. "Go sell a bike."

Marc grinned and nudged me gently with his elbow. "Don't let your coffee get cold," he said, then walked out into the showroom.

And I scrolled back to Edward Masen.

There were so many reasons why it couldn't be him.

For a start, there were probably dozens of Edward Masens in Sydney. And then there was Sydney itself. I mean, what would a vampire be doing on the east coast of Australia, a place known for sunshine and blue skies? I'd lived here eight months and could count the cloudy days on two hands! It was too ridiculous to even think about. Besides, was that even how he spelt his real name? I'd never seen it written down. Maybe he was Mason, with an O.

No, it couldn't be him.

But the cursor still hovered over his name, and I swore softly beneath my breath as the old fault line in my heart rippled.

There'd been a time when something like this would have sent my heart

and mind into over-drive. I would have opened the file without a second though, hoping desperately for a clue, anything, that might tell me where he was, what he was doing, and maybe lead me back to him, dignity be damned. If his presence had once ruled my life, his absence had consumed it.

But not anymore.

I was different now.

I wasn't that Bella anymore. And I'd let Edward Cullen go a long time ago.

It had been eight years.

Eight years since I last saw his face or heard his voice. Felt his touch. Eight years since he tore my heart from my chest and took it with him, God knows where.

It had taken a long time, and a Mexican sunrise, for me to get it back. But get it back, I did.

I'd worked damned hard to get over Edward Cullen, or Masen, and I'd succeeded. Succeeded spectacularly. A scholarship to UCLA. Graduating with honours. And now the research job here at the University of Sydney.

Great friends, busy social life.

Alexander and that summer in Hawaii.

Sam and his small flat in London. That had been an amazing year.

So why was I still staring at the name on the screen? Why was my stomach in knots, and my mouth dry?

"Shock." I told myself. "And curiosity. Perfectly natural reactions. That's all." I'd gone so long without thinking about him, so of course seeing his name would bring a reaction. But shock and curiosity weren't getting the job done, and I had plans for the afternoon, so I took a deep breath and went back to checking the database. If I focused, I'd be finished in ten minutes and on my way.

Unfortunately, focussing was easier said than done. My mind kept wandering back to those two words, Edward Masen, and five minutes later I clicked on his customer file, just to prove to myself what I already knewâ€¦that it wasn't him.

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According to the Thunder Road database, Mr Masen had bought a silver Kawasaki Ninja H2R eight months ago. It was a special order and my jaw dropped at the price he'd paid. My jaw dropped further when I saw the top speed listed in the specifications. Apparently the Ninja H2R was capable of doing 340 kilometres an hour. So Mr Masen was wealthy, and he liked some serious speed. I swallowed hard as my hand tightened around the mouse.

His personal information listed an address an hour away at Palm

Beach. His sales consultant had been someone called George. Not Marc, then. He'd paid upfront, the full amount, without a payment plan. And he'd used a premium platinum credit card to do it.

Edward Cullen had had a premium platinum credit card. He'd always paid upfront, the full amount, for everything he bought.

He'd liked to drive fast.

But he would never live in the sun. He would never live in a house at Palm Beach. I was being stupid. And I didn't know what bothered me more; seeing his name again, or my reaction to itâ€!

Did I\_ want \_it to be him?

"No." Not now. Not anymore.

Taking a deep breath, I closed the customer file, and with a willpower born of long practice, pushed Edward Cullen from my mind.

He hadn't been into bikes, anyway. It wouldn't be him.

\*\*Author Notes: This was a short chapter, I know. More of an introduction really. Next chapter will be longer and I hope to post it in a the next few days :)

\*\*This story is unbeta'd so any mistakes are mine. \*\*

## 2. Chapter 2

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Palm Beach is nestled on a lush green peninsula in Sydney's northern suburbs. With a stretch of pristine ocean beach on one side a sparkling bay on the other it's a beautiful part of the world, but not the place to find a vampire. But old habits die hard, it seemed, because twenty four hours after I saw Edward Masen's name on that database, and eight years after he left me in that forest, I found myself chasing him once again.

And I hated myself for it.

That name in the database was going to haunt me though, until I'd proved to myself, beyond any doubt, that I was right. I'd already wasted half my weekend trying not to think about him, and that was half a weekend too long. So I would come here to Palm Beach, probably discover that Edward Masen was a middle-aged man with a Kawasaki and a mid-life crisis, and that would be the end of it. I'd go back to my real life, and Edward Cullen would go back to being a cautionary tale from my past.

Some of my tension faded away as I drove slowly along the narrow, windy road towards Edward Masen's address.

He lived on the ocean side. Number 42 was my goal and I smiled as I

pulled up across the road from a beautifully renovated traditional beach bungalow of grey and white, with a wide verandah. I got out for a closer look, feeling more and more like my old self as I felt the sun kiss my skin. How could I have ever considered that he'd live here? With a surfboard leaning against the verandah railing and neighbours either side of him? A cat stretched lazily across the stone front steps, enjoying the warmth of early spring and obviously very much at home.

"I am such an idiot." The hard knot in my stomach at last slipped undone. And even if it had been him, what would that mean?

"Not much." Because, really, what sort of life could we have?

In a sudden moment of clarity, I realised I wasn't just over Edward Cullen, I'd outgrown him. When I'd thought of him in the past, and even yesterday in Marc's office, it was through the filter of my adolescence. Those painful memories came from the heart and mind of an inexperienced, insecure teenage girl. But I was twenty six now. The life I lived, the future I wanted, held no place for a seventeen year old boy. Especially a seventeen year old boy who had to live on the edge of society, always on the run from the sun.

I felt a pang of pity for Edward Cullen, and a sudden, gentle fondness. I found myself hoping, wherever he was, he was happy.

I was about to walk away when the front door of number 42 opened. The cat and I watched as a man crossed the verandah and came down the front path. He was tall and blonde, and very human. Maybe a little older than me, he was wearing a Stormtrooper t-shirt, with a laptop bag tucked under his arm, and he was yawning spectacularly.

So maybe this was Edward Masen?

At the end of the path he stopped.

"You right?" he asked, giving me a puzzled smile and I realised with a stab of embarrassment that I'd been leaning against his letterbox, staring.

"Ohâ€|no, sorryâ€|" I took a quick step back. "I'm just, umâ€|" I waved my arm around, as if that might explain me loitering outside his house, and my car keys flew out of my hand. They landed at his feet with a clunk.

He bent quickly, scooped them up, and said something as he held them out to me, but he was yawning again, his words a low mumble I didn't catch. So I smiled a little and gave a vague sort of nod, hoping that would work as a response. He nodded too.

"You'd better come in then, I'll let him know you're here."

"What?"

Crap! Why did I nod? What did I just say yes to? I turned and hurried back across the road to the car, nearly stumbling over my feet as I went. It wasn't until I grabbed the door handle that I realised the sleepy blonde guy still had my keys. "Shit!"

He was up on the verandah now, disappearing through the front door, and I ran up the path behind him.

"Wait! No! There's been a mistake!"

The door opened into a long hallway. There were three doors to the right, all closed. To the left was the entry to a large living room. And my quarry was nowhere in sight.

"Um, hello?" There was silence and I took a tentative step inside, my mind racing with hastily concocted excuses for why I was here. Was I a scout for Vogue Living looking for t month's cover? Or an Uber driver come to the wrong house to pick up a fare? I was just deciding that my best option was to say, in my broadest American accent, that I was a lost tourist, when I took a proper look into the living room.

It was large, open plan, flowing into a gourmet kitchen with views over the ocean, but that wasn't what made my heart skid to a halt.

It was the shelves behind the sofa. They reached from floor to ceiling, and were neatly stacked with row upon row of CDs and vinyl records.

Without thinking, I took a small, shaky step into the room, then another, my eyes furiously scanning the rows.

Everything was categorised by genre, then in alphabetical order within that genre. Jazz, blues, classical, rock, punk, indie!

Just like Edward Cullen's music.

"I've let him know you're here." The blonde guy was back and my thoughts scattered.

"Oh, umâ€|actuallyâ€|I think there's beenâ€|" He gave me a sheepish smile as he held out my keys. I'd forgotten all about them.

"These are yours, sorry." I took them from him, mumbling a thank you. "He shouldn't be long," the guy went on. "The piano's just there, if you want to try it out while you wait. It's a good one, but I know he's happy to negotiate on the price."

I hadn't even noticed the piano. A glossy black upright stood against the opposite wall.

The Stormtrooper fan yawned again, and ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry. We've pulled an all-nighter, Ed's just waking up." He frowned and I could only imagine my expression.

"Ed?"

"You don't mind waiting, do you?"

"Iâ€|noâ€|" So this guy wasn't Edward Masen, then?

He smiled, flashing perfect white teeth. "Okay, look, I have to get going, but if he doesn't show in five minutes it means he's fallen asleep again, so go and bang on the door. Last one on the right." He

slung his laptop bag over his shoulder and began backing away. "But bang hard. Because seriously, the guy sleeps like the dead."

Alone in the living room, I took a deep breath and tried to think logically.

Ed.

Edward Masen.

I already knew someone with that name lived here. But someone with that name, who stored his music this way?

"Coincidence," I muttered. A spectacular coincidence, but still a coincidence. Renee used to watch documentaries on cable about this sort of thing. And what was I still doing here anyway? I clutched my keys tightly and walked back into the hall, ready to leave.

At the end of the hallway, the last door on the right stood slightly ajar now. All was silent. Thankfully, Ed seemed to have fallen back to sleep, and I could get out quietly before embarrassing myself.

I had planned to walk outside, I really had. I was going to go down the path, climb into my car and drive away. But curiosity was burning through me, and instead, I found myself creeping towards the bedroom door and holding my breath as I peeked inside.

He was sprawled across the massive bed on his stomach, his face turned away from me as he snored softly. His tanned legs were tangled in the sheets and one arm hung over the edge of the mattress. The blinds were open and the midday sun fell brightly on the long-fingered hand without any hint of a spark.

If I'd had any doubts before, now they disappeared instantly. He wasn't Edward. Well, at least, not Edward Cullen.

The hard-muscled breath of his bare back and shoulders was more proof. This was no lanky teenager.

But his hairâ€¦

It was a mess of vivid bronze against the white of the pillow and I began to wonderâ€¦

Could this be a human relation of Edward's?

Some distant Masen cousin who'd inherited his name and his love of music, along with the hair?

I'd heard of much weirder things from Renee.

The possibility hit me like a wrecking ball, and I gasped. A little too loudly.

The snoring stopped, the figure in the bed stirred, my curiosity fled and the thought of being caught in a strange man's room, watching him sleep, sent a wave of hot panic pulsing through me. I started to back away, bumped into a chair I hadn't seen, and fell flat on my backside. The chair toppled over. It crashed into the bedroom door, slamming it shut, and Edward Masen sat up with a start.

I didn't stop to look. I scrambled to my feet, shoved past the chair, opened the door, and took off down the hallway, bumping into the wall and sliding along the polished floorboards as I went.

There'd be time to think about Edward's descendant later and hopefully I'd be in my car and gone before he had a chance to dial triple 0 and have me arrested.

Then with one word, my whole world changed.

"Bella?"

I knew that voice. From a long time ago. Deep and smooth, hearing it again brought a heated rush of pleasure and pain and stopped me in my tracks.

I turned slowly, and faced Edward Cullen.

He stood there, sheet clutched round his hips, chest heaving with rapid breaths. His green eyes vivid with raw shock and disbelief.

"My God!" he whispered, and his gaze ran over me slowly, like he was taking in every detail. But I was taking in details of my own.

The line of his jaw, the curve of his cheekbones, were as familiar to me as my own, but they framed the face of a man, not a boy. At a guess, he looked like he was close to thirty. His nose was different than it had been when I knew him. Not quite as fine or straight, like perhaps it had been broken as some stage. There was heavy stubble on his jaw, and a light dusting of hair across his chest. It was a nice chest.

And those eyes, now so green, yet still the same.

I used to drown in those eyes.

My mind couldn't keep up with what it was seeing. It searched for logic and understanding, and failed miserably. Silence stretched between us, two people obviously trying to reconcile past with present, and then suddenly, Edward spoke, his tone clearly incredulous.

"What! what on earth are you doing in Australia?" He dragged his free hand through his sleep-tousled hair.

"Work," I blurted. "I work here. Live here." My heart didn't seem to know whether to pound even harder than it already was, or to stop altogether. My eyes raked Edward's form from head to toe. He was different, but still beautiful. His feet were bare and I realised I'd never seen him without shoes before. Suddenly, it seemed very intimate, looking at his feet, and I glanced away.

"I thought!" he began, voice soft. The column of his throat moved slowly as he swallowed hard. His free hand moved, it was just a small movement and I thought for a moment, with thudding heart, that he was reaching for me. But then he curled his fingers into a fist that he dropped back to his side. He shook his head and briefly closed his

eyes. "You're interested in buying the piano?" His voice was matter-of-fact now.

"Huh? Oh, no."

"Nick saidâ€|"

"The guy with the Stormtrooper shirt?"

>"Yes."<p>

Now it made sense. "You're selling your piano?"

"Nick thought you were answering the ad."

"Oh."

There was another silence as I continued to stare at Edward, and Edward stared back, his intense gaze almost a glare. I wondered what my face looked like. And whether we'd ever mention the elephant in the room. Or the ex-vampire.

"Iâ€|you'reâ€|you'reâ€|" The word wouldn't seem to come. "You've got a cat."

"Neighbour's cat," he said, frowning. "It just likes to hang out here. I don't know why."

"Because you'reâ€|" Still, I couldn't say it. It was as though the impossibility of what I was seeing had robbed me of the right words.

"Human," Edward said quietly. "I'm human."

Yes. He was. Very human. "Umâ€|how?"

Edward took a slow, deep breath and looked towards the living room. "You have questions, of course."

There was something in his tone, in his posture, that gave me the feeling he didn't want to talk. That there was some inner conflict he was trying to conceal. It reminded me of some of the first conversations we'd had, back in the Forks High cafeteria almost a decade ago.

"I'll justâ€|erâ€|" He indicated the sheet bunched round his hips, the faintest hint of an apologetic smile on his lips, and I was surprised when a subtle blush coloured his cheeks. "I'll be right back." He paused. "Make yourself comfortable. It's a long story."

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\*\*A/N: Thank you to Edward's Eternal who kindly cast her expert eye over this chapter. Mwah! xx\*\*

\*\*And thank you, thank you, thank you all for the wonderful response to this story so far! Your comments and reviews have been amazing and I appreciate them all \*\*\*\*J\*\*

\*\*I'm going on holiday tomorrow so I won't be able to update for

about a week or so. But I'll be working on chapter 3 while I'm away  
\*\*\*\*J\*\*

.

### 3. Chapter 3

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It's a strange thing, delayed reaction.

A moment ago, I'd been kind of numb with shock as I'd stood in front of Edward Cullen for the first time in eight years. But now, as I watched him kick the trailing sheet out of his way before walking back up the hall, the full impact of his sudden appearance hit me.

As he disappeared into his bedroom I had to grab the door post to hold myself up. While my legs went to water, my breath caught in my chest and my head spun. The knot that had started in my stomach seemed to spread through my body. Everything was starting to go a little dark and fuzzy round the edges. With a sharp gasp I managed to gulp some much-needed air, and allowed myself to slide gently down the door post until I was sitting on the glossy timber floor of the hall, right in the open doorway.

My gaze focused on the boards where Edward had just stood.

Was this real? Not just Edward being human, but Edward being here?

I was shaking so hard now, my mind a tumble of old memories and new shock as I tried to make sense of what had just happened. But it didn't make sense.

"How?" I muttered, hugging myself, as much to stop the shaking as for the comfort. "How?" Hot tears stung my eyes and tracked down my cheeks and I dashed them away quickly with the back of my hand. "Oh, Godâ€| My voice cracked. "How?"

There were so many questions. Too many questions. My brain was on overload, with thoughts just skidding over the surface, no longer able to sink in. My heart was the same. So many feelings trying to punch their way out of my chest, coming so hard and fast I could barely identify what they were.

And things were going dark and fuzzy again.

I closed my eyes and forced myself to take some slow deep yoga breaths while I visualised the gently rippling water of a calm blue ocean. One thing at a time, I told myself. Focus on one thing at a time. You don't have to have everything solved at once â€“ there'll be time for that later. Just pick one thing for now, and go with it. \_

Standing up. I'd start with standing up. That would be my whole focus

for now and with that in mind, I took some more deep breaths.

Gradually, the shakes began to calm. My mind started to clear a little and though the knot in my stomach remained, it no longer felt like it was trying to reach up and strangle me. I opened my eyes, looked down the hall and wondered how long I had until Edward re-emerged.

From the bedroom came the crash of something falling over, and a muffled curse. A moment later I heard a shower start. So I had probably had at least a few minutes then.

With one more deep breath, I stood up. My legs were fine. The shakes had reduced to a slight tremble in my hands. "Better," I murmured and gave myself a mental pat on the back. "Much better."

Edward had suggested I wait in the living room, so I did. But sitting still wasn't an option right now. Calmer I might have been, but there was still a nervous energy coursing through me that meant sinking into the squishy leather sofa wasn't about to happen. Along with the nervous energy, was a curiosity so intense it almost burned, and I found myself scouring the room for hints and clues that might answer some of my questions. Because in the back of my mind lurked the possibility that Edward might decide to tell me nothing.

It was a large, open space. I got the impression that what had once been separate kitchen, living and dining rooms had all been knocked into one. It reminded me a little of a loft apartment I visited once in New York, but without the exposed brick. The living room-kitchen flowed into a sunroom that spilled onto a wide deck that overlooked the sea. The whole place was awash with light, and simple in dÃ©cor just a few modern pieces of obvious good quality. There was nothing from his past, nothing I recognised, apart from the music collection. Even the piano was different. The glossy black upright looked new and I wondered what had happened to the baby grand he'd had in Forks. I looked for the battered old trophy cup where he used to toss his car keys, but if he still had it, it wasn't in this room.

A closer inspection of his music did reveal some changes though - the Rolling Stones. Some Jimi Hendrix. There was a Bob Dylan album cover sitting on the glass-topped coffee table. "I thought you didn't like 60s or 70s music," I murmured softly to myself.

He had some artwork decorating the walls. Mostly modern pieces, and some arty black and white architectural style photos of old buildings and brick archways.

There was a blanket and pillow tossed on the armchair in the corner and I wondered if Nick the Stormtrooper had slept on the sofa after the all-nighter. There was a console and controllers in the entertainment unit beneath the flatscreen. Next to what was obviously an expensive sound system.

The kitchen island was a mess of scattered papers. Floorplans. Blue prints. Pencil sketches. Typed lists of building materials. There was also a laptop, and a pair of reading glasses. "You're an architect? With bad eye sight?" I picked them up and looked through the lenses. Human Edward was short sighted.

Laying among the papers and pens was a watch, a modern piece of stainless steel and black. A worn-looking leather satchel bag lay open on one of the island stools, its flap hanging down, revealing a couple of folders, and a pair of headphones. "You're messier than you used to be."

Two pizza boxes poked out of the silver trash can in the kitchen. I knew I shouldn't, but I snuck a peek in the walk-in pantry, wondering what an ex-vampire eats. "Oh, wow!" To say it was well-stocked was an understatement. It looked more like an in-house supermarket with rows and rows of tins and packets and jars. "Tim Tams?" Edward Cullen liked Tim Tams? There were several packets of the chocolate biscuits, one of them open and the contents mostly gone. And he obviously liked variety in his breakfast cereal — there were five different types of muesli, all opened. Curry was clearly a big favourite too, judging by the number of jars of Tandoori paste.

"All this for one person." Or perhaps he didn't live alone. Not that I cared. I rubbed at the knot in my chest and turned to the huge, black, double-door fridge, tucked away in its own special recess, curious to see what treasures it held. But as I reached for the handle, it was a child's drawing, laminated and held in place by a souvenir fridge magnet from the Big Banana that took all my attention.

Drawn in crayon, the vivid, multi-coloured birthday cake was decorated with glitter and stick on stars, while the rainbow-striped candles were being lit by a grinning, purple, fire-breathing dragon. Underneath the dragon, some small hand had taken great care and trouble to write Hapy Birhtday, followed by a long row of wobbly x's and o's and a large lime green heart.

"Can I get you something?"

Edward's voice startled me and I quickly let go of the door handle. "Oh! Um, no — I'm fine." I cleared my throat and moved away from the kitchen into the living area. The shakes were coming back and I started again with the deep breaths as I stood beside the piano.

His hair was wet. It dripped onto the shoulders of the white t-shirt that hung loose over blue jeans. His feet were still bare. There was a polite smile on his lips, and caution in his eyes as he pushed his hair back from his forehead.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

He walked past me into the kitchen. He no longer had those supernaturally smooth moves, but I thought I saw an echo of the vampire in the ease of his walk and the subtle roll of his shoulders. "I was going to make a coffee," he said. "Are you sure you wouldn't like something?"

"Actually —" My mouth was suddenly dry. "Something cold, if you've got it?"

He nodded and opened the fridge. "There's orange juice. Guava juice. Soda water. Coke. Ice water —" He didn't mention the drawing. And I

didn't ask.

"Orange juice, thanks."

"No problem. Ice?"

"Er, no."

He was so polite. Almost formal. I felt like I was with a stranger. Which he was, in a way.

He grabbed the juice and a glass from a cupboard. It was so weird watching him like this, calmly playing host and moving around the kitchen in such a human way. My eyes traced the line of blue veins that ran through the back of his large hands, and over the muscles of his forearms. I was starting to get that overwhelmed feeling again and took a slow breath.

"It's a nice place," I said as he set the glass on the island and I pulled up one of the stools.

"Thank you." He flashed me the quickest of smiles as he dropped a coffee pod into the machine.

"You're an architect." I motioned towards the laptop and papers, trying to sound confident and casual and not like my world had just been turned upside down.

"Engineer," he corrected

"Oh." My mistake was small, but for some stupid reason, I felt foolish. "When I saw the plansâ€!"

I was granted another quick smile. "There's a certain amount of crossover between the two," he said, taking some of the sting out of my embarrassment. I wondered if he would ask me something. Like where I worked, or lived. But he didn't. He wasn't comfortable about me being here, that was obvious. There was tension in the set of his jaw and in the tightness around his eyes. But then, I'd had a day to get used to the idea of him, while for Edward, this was all completely out of the blue. So Alice mustn't have seen me coming this time.

"How did you find me?" he asked. His voice was casual enough, but it was almost like he'd read my mind. For a moment I wondered if he could. I was a little thrown by the question and blurted out my answer.

"You were in the data base. And I wasn't looking."

That didn't make proper sense, I knew. He frowned as the coffee machine began to gurgle and he set a stainless steel coffee cup in position. The smell of espresso filled the room.

"What database?"

"Thunder Road Motorcycles."

"You work at Thunder Road?" There was a hint of surprise in his voice, I thought.

"No. My friend works there. He's an archaeologist."

The coffee machine gurgled its last. Edward picked up the cup as I began to explain.

"What I mean is, he's an archaeologist but he can't find any work. His next love is motorcycles so he got a job in a dealership until something comes up. He's better with a trowel and a toothbrush than computers though, so when he was having problems with his customer database he asked me to help." I took a long sip of juice. "Your name came up."

"But not Cullen." He was frowning again.

"No. Masen."

His eyebrows rose and there was new surprise in his face. I nodded, setting the glass down on the marble. Of course, he'd been dealing with Jasper and the fall-out of my ruined birthday party while Carlisle had stitched up my arm. He'd never heard the conversation. I'd never mentioned it. "Carlisle told me," I said softly.

"Oh."

A raw silence stretched between us as Edward focused on his coffee and I stared at the drawing on the fridge. I wondered if he could hear the pounding of my heart like he once would have. Probably not.

"So then you were curious?" When I looked up his face was smooth, eyes calm. Like we were talking about the weather. I swallowed past the thickness in my throat.

"I didn't think it could be you, not here." I motioned towards the glass doors and the sun. "Butâ€|" I shrugged as Edward leant against the sink, arms crossed tightly over his chest, coffee in his hand.

"When?" he said quietly, looking down at steaming cup. "How long ago did you find me in the database?"

"Just yesterday. It was a shock, seeing your name and it made meâ€| I was really coming here to prove to myself that it couldn't be you."

"But it was me." He lifted his eyes, staring at me intently. "So, where do we start?" he asked, voice low. He sounded almost resigned.

The truth was, I didn't know where to start. It all felt too big, and part of me hadn't expected him to talk, but once again I went back to my mantra â€" just pick one thingâ€|

"Tell me how you became human?"

He nodded, and took a mouthful of coffee. "Short version, I got human blood in my veins."

I waited for more, but as Edward stayed silent, my eyes widened.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"Butâ€| "

"What were you expecting?"

"Iâ€|I don't know. Not that." I shook my head. "Vampires take human blood into their bodies all the time."

"Not directly into their veins, though, that's the difference. Nothing can break through vampire skin, except vampire teeth, and we aren't normally in the habit of biting ourselves."

We? I found it curious that he was including himself as a vampire in that explanation. And then I thought about what he'd said.

"So, you're saying it's like the difference between swallowing a pill and having an intravenous injection? The shot always has a more powerful, more concentrated result."

"In basic terms, yes, it's like that."

"So, human blood is the antidote to vampire venom?"

"It seems to be."

"Ohâ€|" For a moment my mind focused on the science, and I didn't think too much about what I was actually discussing, or who I was discussing it with. "How does that work, though? I mean, if human blood is the antidote to venom, why does venom turn humans into vampires?"

"Carlisle has several theories." Edward swirled his coffee as he stared into its depths, avoiding eye contact, it seemed. "He wonders if it could be something to do with blood gases, or the oxygenation of cells. Also, vampires are effectively a closed system so the introduction of a foreign element into that system could be a factor."

"Like an immunity issue?"

He shrugged. "Maybe. Or it could be one of those mysteries of the universe, and we'll never know the answer."

"What do you think it is?"

He lifted his bright green gaze. "I think the universe likes to keep its secrets."

He didn't want to talk anymore, that was clear now. If that last sentence wasn't a clue, his body language said it all. Despite the green eyes and the beating heart, now that the initial shock was over he was just like he had been when he'd said goodbye eight years ago. Detached. Unemotional. I obviously had that effect on him. But I was stronger than the last time I saw him. And I had questions, lots of questions, and in some strange way I felt he owed me.

"You said in the hallway that it was a long story."

He nodded, and set his cup down on the sink. I thought he might pull up a stool and sit, but he didn't.

"My family and I, we came across a hiker in the woods outside Seattle. There was a newbornâ€|" He paused to let me fill in the gaps, and when I nodded for him to go on, he did. "Jasper and Emmett took care of the newborn while Carlisle went to the hiker. The venom hadn't spread too far and he thought there was hope â€" he asked me to try to save her."

A slow shiver made its way up my spine. "Like you saved me."

He looked away, towards the deck and the sea. "I did as he asked, but I began to take too much." His jaw tightened, hard. "Emmett pulled me away in time but the urge to bite was too strong. I tore into my own arm, down deep, into the brachial artery." He rubbed absently at his bicep. "My mouth was still full of her blood and the power of the bite forced that blood into my system." He was still for a moment, and then he turned back to me with another one of those polite smiles. "Is that everything you want to know?"

My mouth had been hanging open and I shut it quickly as I processed what I'd just been told. Not even close, I thought. "How long did the change take?"

"Eight days."

Eight. So much longer than when he became a vampire. I thought of my own experience in that ballet studio and wondered how he could have stood it.

"What about the hiker?"

"She survived," Edward answered. "Thanks to Carlisle, some paramedics and a dose of painkillers that would explain away any bizarre hallucinations she might have had."

"Likeâ€|vampires?"

He nodded.

In the silence I suddenly became aware of a soft knocking sound. It took me a moment to realise it was Edward, standing one foot crossed over the other, tapping out a rapid rhythm against one of the cabinet doors. The human was restless.

"How long have you been human?"

"A while."

"Oh?"

There was a slight hesitation before he spoke. "Seven, almost eight, years."

I didn't know what I'd been expecting, or if I'd been expecting anything at all, but his answer made me feel like I'd been kicked in the guts. "Youâ€|soâ€|youâ€|it happened right after you left Forks?"

"A few months later." He looked away again while a startling wave of anguish and resentment came from nowhere, crashed over me, pulling me under and holding me down. I couldn't breathe and the thought that had been nagging at me since I saw him half-naked in the hallway, finally pushed its way forward.

Why hadn't he come to find me?

I would have still been living in Forks. He would have known exactly where I was. And even after highschool I was easily traceable for someone like a Cullen.

From somewhere, I found my voice and it was surprisingly strong and clear. "When did you come to Australia?"

"Does it matter?"

"I don't know. Is there a reason why you can't tell me?"

"Five years ago." His voice was so calm, his eyes so remote.

Five years. Long, long before I'd even thought of leaving the US. To give myself a moment, I drained my glass of juice and hoped he didn't notice how my hand shook. I should go. Just pick up and go. But apparently, I wasn't finished torturing myself yet.

"And, um, what made you come here?"

Another shrug. He uncrossed his arms and, still leaning with his back against the sink, curled his long fingers around the edge of the counter. The veins in his arms stood out as his lifeblood pumped through him. "It's somewhere different. I like it here. And it's warm."

California is warm. Texas is warm.

But he'd wanted to put an ocean between us. He'd changed his name.

That was how much he didn't want me. Even as a human.

In this new silence I tried to keep myself together, reminding myself that I was over him and hating myself for feeling the way I did. I tried to hate him, too. I sat, perfectly still, barely breathing, staring at Edward's knuckles as they strained white beneath his tanned skin, almost like the bones would break through. I had more questions, but I didn't want to hear the answers. I didn't want to be here. I got off the stool, careful not to stumble or fall. With great effort and dignity, I smiled.

"Well, that's everything I guess. I should probably go. Thanks for the juice, good luck with the engineering. And don't worry, I'll keep the secrets of the universe safe."

At least this time I'd be the one walking away.

"Bella!"

I didn't look back.

I shouldn't have come. I should have never opened that file. "It's okay," I said as I walked past the coffee table. "I'll show myself out."

It's funny how one small, seemingly inconsequential thing can change a person's whole world. In the middle of the living room I stopped, and as I stood staring at the Bob Dylan album on the coffee table, it was as if something clicked into place. A new truth began to dawn. That album cover inspired a dozen different memories, words and actions that suddenly took on very different meanings. And each new meaning led to another, a long chain of thought that brought me to a realisation that left me breathless and burning.

"Oh! Oh, my God..." Slowly, I turned back to Edward, and I spoke without thinking, the words tumbling from my lips without permission.

"You still love me. You always have."

He was holding the empty juice glass, and he almost dropped it. The facade of cool composure vanished as he fumbled the glass awkwardly so it bounced off his hands, a one-handed juggle so clumsy and so very human, until he got a firm grip and almost slammed it down on the counter. He dragged his hands through his hair, his face all shock and confusion like when he'd seen me in the hallway. But there was fear as well. A heartbreaking fear that shook me more than his detachment had. My heart was racing, like it might give out at any moment, but I stood my ground, facing him, waiting for answers, just as someone knocked on the open front door.

"Hello!" called a woman's voice. "Anyone home? I've come about the piano."

-o0o-

\*\*A/N: Thank you all for the amazing response to this story! xxx  
Please stay with me, all will gradually be revealed :)\*\*

\*\*And thank you Melanie for your super beta skills, and the debate over "spun" and "span". xxx \*\*

\*\*After this chapter was beta'd, I decided I wanted to change a few things around, and I came up with a new ending I liked better, so any mistakes you see are mine :)\*\*

End  
file.